

General Suggestions for Teaching Writing to Adolescent English Language Learners (ELLs)

The following suggestions are intended as guidelines for supporting English language learners in the classroom. It is important to remember to linguistically accommodate instruction according to the English proficiency levels of students. The suggestions below are not an exhaustive list—contact your Educational Service Center for additional information about strategies for working with English language learners.

Provide intensive teacher modeling of writing (in front of the class) with explicit examples of all of the thinking processes involved. Verbalize your own thinking and engage ELLs in the process.

- Demonstrate how writers read their own writing and get more ideas about what else to write.
- Model some of the questions that writers ask themselves to evaluate what they have written.
- Model exemplary writing practices and demonstrate how writers write about meaningful topics.
- Model how to write for a purpose and for an audience.
- Have ELLs participate during the demonstration so they have an opportunity to practice and better understand the thinking behind the writing.
- Use a variety of mentor texts as models of effective writing.

Study mentor texts to demonstrate the connection between writing and reading. This teaches ELLs to read like writers.

- Include culturally relevant texts and materials that mirror family backgrounds, experiences, characters, and interests to help ELLs make connections between their own lives and school.
- Consider how the text supports ELLs as they write, including what they can try in their own writing.
- Notice the structure of the language and if it matches the students' stage of language acquisition.
- Point out differences in authors' styles and the distinguishing characteristics of text types.

Establish attainable goals based on ELLs' level of English proficiency and writing knowledge and skills.

- Sequence and scaffold writing assignments and tasks into manageable steps/small

increments.

- Introduce and focus on one writing element/grammatical point at a time.
- Allow time for ELLs to incorporate an element/grammatical point into their own writing.
- Continuously reassess and set new goals based on student progress.
- Ensure that students are writing frequently as this will support end-of-the-year TELPAS Writing requirements.

Incorporate procedural supports (i.e., conferences, planning forms and charts, sentence frames, word lists, and rubrics/checklists for revision/editing), oral language, and many peer-assisted learning opportunities.

- Foster a sense of community that supports taking risks, uses language for real purposes in authentic writing situations, views students and teachers as writers, and encourages collaboration as the norm.
- Have ELLs work in small groups, in pairs, or in triads. Ensure that ELLs are grouped with students who can offer beneficial feedback that will help them improve their writing.
- Help ELLs develop their ideas for writing in English. When ELLs think in their native language first and then try to translate what they are thinking into English, their writing may reflect the nuances of their native language and be difficult to comprehend (i.e., inaccurate verb tenses or word choice). For example, have ELLs brainstorm with others and/or their peers and then read and talk about their writing with their peers or teacher.
- Model for students how to use all procedures and graphic organizers.
- Provide guided practice for students to work together using rubrics and checklists to clarify criteria and expectations for writers.
- Provide sentence stems for students to access for both oral and written discourse.

Demonstrate how writing and reading reflect thinking and learning. Even though ELLs may have mastered content knowledge, their writing ability may not reflect this knowledge.

“In order to communicate effectively, writers need to know many words and to know those words well. This means knowing the various meanings a word may have (e.g., *Mean*, *root*, *log*, and *citation* are all examples of words with multiple meanings.); knowing how to use the word grammatically (e.g., We use a mop to mop the floor, but we don’t broom the floor when we use a broom; we sweep it.); knowing the words it typically occurs with (e.g., *toxic waste*; *poisonous snake*); and knowing its level of politeness or formality (e.g., *kids* versus *children*, *fake* versus *fictitious*). Because this knowledge requires time and multiple exposures to each word in a variety of contexts, ELLs are likely to need a great deal of work in vocabulary in order to read and write like their English-proficient peers” (The Education Alliance: Brown University).

- Provide opportunities for ELLs to explain their writing and to obtain help in expressing

their knowledge effectively.

- Use visual cues, such as having students draw a picture before they write. Then, elicit more detail and provide language models by talking with students about their drawings (e.g., “Tell me more about...”).
- Provide rich listening, speaking, and reading experiences; multiple exposures to words; and explicit teaching of definitions and usage.
 - Develop a basic writer’s vocabulary (display in room and/or provide individual copies for writing notebooks). Include content-area and thematic words.
 - Incorporate lists of Spanish (or other native languages) cognates (i.e., words with common origins and meanings) as applicable.
 - Teach ELLs how to use dictionaries, thesauruses, and computer resources.

Demonstrate how writing is a recursive process.

- Have students write frequently, as this provides opportunity for practice and improvement.
- Model, model, model to help students understand all stages of the writing process, what you are asking them to do, how to do it, and why.
- Have ELLs revise and edit a paper in their writing folder/portfolio after they have learned more about a targeted grammatical point or text type/genre.
- Encourage ELLs to think and talk about what they have learned (e.g., “I learned to use a comma after an introductory clause”; “I use more dialogue now”; “I didn’t include enough supporting details”).
- Prompt for more information or clarification, when necessary.

Teach written conventions (grammar, mechanics, usage, and spelling) in the context of actual writing.

“Writing activities provide excellent context for providing the models, practice, explanations, and feedback that ELLs need” (The Education Alliance: Brown University).

- Provide models using sentences and examples from mentor texts and teacher writing.

“ELLs learn many structural patterns of English unconsciously through hearing them and then using them in their speech. . . . [ELLs] do not have an intuitive sense of what ‘sounds right’ in English. That sense develops with time and experience. ELLs’ grammar improves over time when they are provided with good language models, guided practice, clear explanations, and tactful but explicit feedback on grammatical correctness” (The Education Alliance: Brown University).
- Encourage ELLs to figure out the spellings of new and different words that express their

thoughts.

“Some ELLs ‘play it safe’ when they write, using only words they have memorized or can copy from the classroom print environment. This can result in writing that has no spelling errors but also little individuality” (The Education Alliance: Brown University).

Provide varied and increasingly challenging writing experiences for students. Scaffold as appropriate to a student’s proficiency level.

- Incorporate authentic writing assignments and provide opportunities for ELLs to write on culturally relevant topics.
- Be sure to revisit writing genres that ELLs may or may not have experienced or mastered previously (other grade-level expectations).

REFERENCES: The Education Alliance, 2006; Haynes, 2007; Kendall & Khoun, 2006.